

EAST CAMBRIDGE HISTORY

East Cambridge has always had a distinct geographical identity. Originally it was a low hill surrounded by marshland and tidal flats, becoming an island during spring tides. In the 19th century, bridge-building brought Boston within easy reach and the neighborhood developed quickly as streets and homes were built, first on the high ground and later on filled land. The boundaries today — a canal and industrial zone to the south, railroad tracks to the west and north, and the Charles River on the east — reflect the early natural boundaries and preserve the neighborhood's small scale.

The population of East Cambridge has changed often since the 19th century. As the original Yankee residents moved out, large numbers of Irish and then Italian immigrants arrived. Today a growing Portuguese community shares the neighborhood with people of these and many other nationalities.

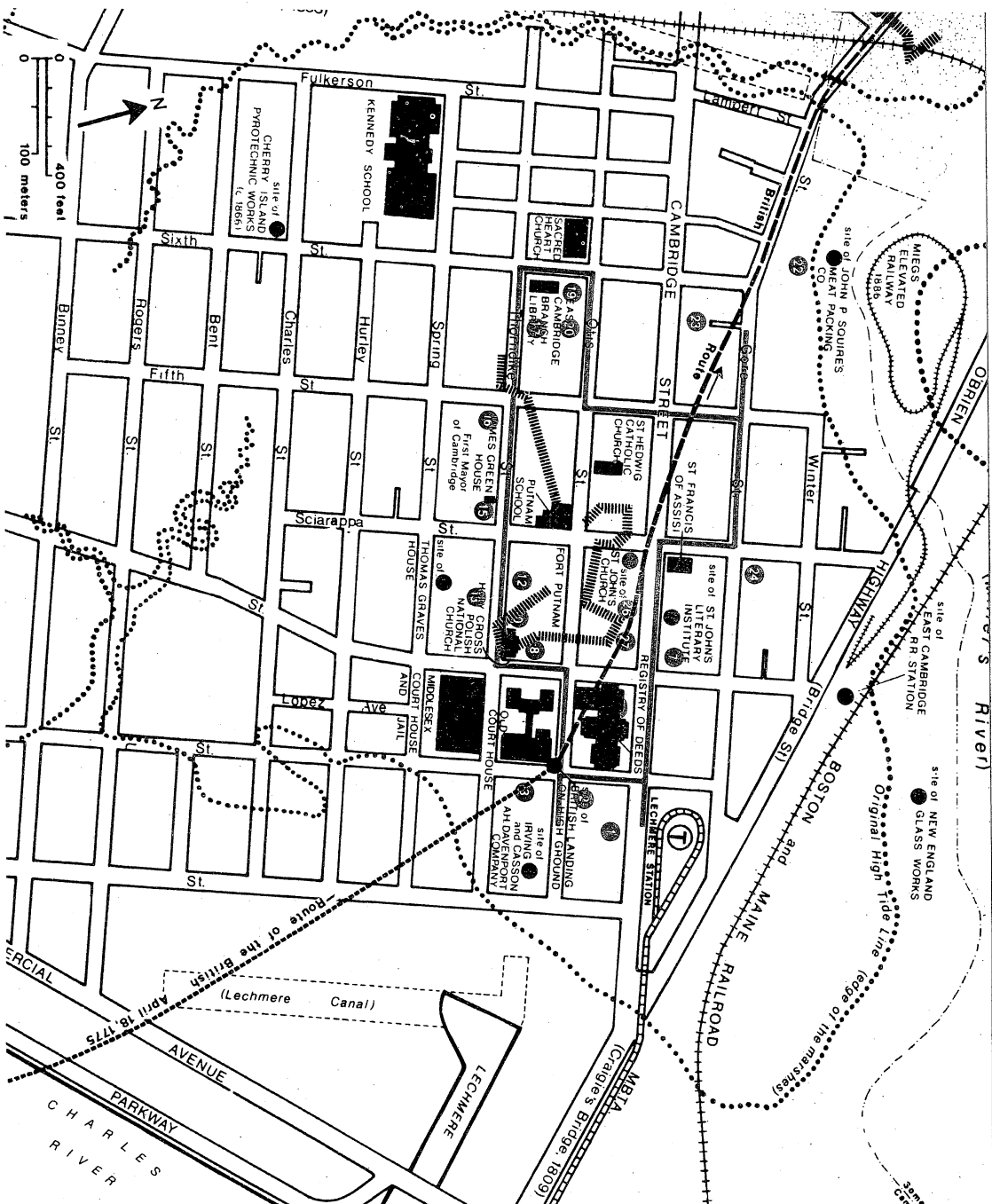
The first building in present-day Cambridge, completed in 1629 for Thomas Graves, Surveyor of Charlestown for the Massachusetts Bay Company, was located in East Cambridge, known as Graves Neck. In 1757 the Graves house and 126 accompanying acres became the property of Richard Lechmere and the area became known as *Lechmere's Point*.

The Point was of strategic value during the Revolution. On April 19, 1775, the British landed here to start their march for *Lexington and Concord*. Later that year, General George Washington built Fort Putnam on the crest of the hill. From here, in March of 1776, the patriots bombarded British troops in Boston during the final days of the Siege of Boston.

The lack of direct transportation between Cambridge and Boston prevented the development of the farmland east of Harvard Square, then the center of town, and in 1790 there were still only four houses east of Dana Street. All this changed on Thanksgiving Day, 1793, when the opening of the *West Boston Bridge* between Cambridgeport and Boston reduced the traveling distance from 8 to 3½ miles. This was the first step in a scheme by local entrepreneurs to develop the Port as a commercial and residential area.

The advantages of East Cambridge for similar development were quickly realized by Dr. Andrew Craigie, who had made a fortune as Apothecary General during the Revolution. Over the next decade, Craigie secretly purchased more than 300 acres on or near Lechmere's Point.

In 1807, Craigie and his fellow speculators, including Massachusetts Governor Christopher Gore and Harrison Gray Otis, formed the Lechmere Point Corporation. When Craigie's Bridge was opened in 1809, Cambridge and Bridge Streets were laid out as turnpikes. The island was surveyed into lots and streets in 1811, opening East Cambridge to development.



Cover: East Cambridge in 1839, from a woodcut by John Warner Barber

This is one of a series of brochures published by the Cambridge Historical Commission on the history and development of the City. Copies may be obtained at Cambridge City Hall.

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Published by the City of Cambridge

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Two astute moves on the part of Craigie and his associates assured the success of their venture. In 1813, they convinced the County government to move from Harvard Square to East Cambridge, where the corporation donated land and a court-house designed by Charles Bulfinch, the leading architect of the day. Next, Craigie persuaded the Boston Porcelain and Glass Company to locate on the Miller's River, a move that marked the beginning of Cambridge as an industrial city.

The County government brought lawyers, clerks and officials to the area, while skilled glassworkers, many of them recruited from England and Germany, settled near the factory. For many years, rich cut glass was an important Cambridge product.

Deming Jarvis of the New England Glass Company went on to found the well-known Sandwich Glass Company on Cape Cod, and several of the country's largest producers trace their corporate ancestry to the same firm.

In the early 19th century, much activity centered around inland farmers traveling to Boston markets. Cattle, hogs, turkeys and sheep were driven down Cambridge Street, bringing business to local blacksmiths, harness-makers and livery stables.

During the 1820s and '30s, the community was a pleasantly balanced residential and industrial area. The population of over 1,000 professionals and factory workers lived in modest single-family homes and cottages clustered throughout the neighborhood. Toward the river, existing firms were gradually joined by larger manufacturers, among them the largest producer of soap in the country.

As the district grew and prospered, it began to rival Cambridgeport and Old Cambridge for political power. After many years of heated conflict, the three districts incorporated as the City of Cambridge in 1846. The first mayor, James D. Green, came from East Cambridge and lived at 96 Thomdike Street.

By this time, the Irish were already well established. When they first arrived, Irish Catholics had had to travel to Boston or Charlestown for church services, but by 1842 they had founded St. John's, the first Catholic church in Cambridge. Nearby, St. John's Literary Institute helped Irish immigrants study English and debating.

By the end of the Civil War, almost half of the population of East Cambridge was Irish. St. John's and other halls were rented nightly for dances or political or labor meetings. The old Institute Theatre, known locally as "The Hip," was still popular in the 1930s.

The Irish were succeeded by immigrants from other European countries, especially Italy, Portugal and Poland. These newcomers settled in workers' cottages and tenements south of Spring Street and joined the Irish laborers in local factories such as J.P. Squire's meat-packing plant, G.G. Page's box factory and the Boston Woven Hose factory.

Industrial growth continued unabated into the 1930s. Between the wars, when Cambridge became New England's third most important manufacturing city, much of the industry was located in East Cambridge, from here came products ranging from furniture and varnish to chocolate candy and rubber raincoats.

Despite its industrial surroundings, much of East Cambridge remains pleasantly residential. To capture the life of the area as

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it once was and as it is today one need only turn to the neighborhood streets.

EAST CAMBRIDGE WALKING GUIDE

The East Cambridge Walking Tour begins at the *Lechmere MBTA Station* on Cambridge Street.

The tour begins, appropriately, with a brick factory building. The *Devon Confectionery Company* (1) is a reminder of the days when this was the commercial and industrial center of the city. The building was formerly the plant of the A.H. Davenport Company and the oldest part dates from 1866.

Walk south on Second Street to the intersection of Otis Street to see two groups of row houses built during East Cambridge's early manufacturing days.

The brick homes at 30-34 Second Street (2) were built between 1836-1839 in the simple Federal Style with dentil courses of brick under the eaves and granite lintels over the windows and doors. They are typical of the modest single-family homes constructed during the first half of the 19th century, when Enoch Robinson, glasscutter, and Ebenezer Roby, housewright, lived here.

Across Otis Street at 36-46 Second Street (3) is a similar row of wooden Greek Revival homes built in 1842 by Jesse Hall, a local carpenter and lumber merchant. Their Greek-inspired columned porches illustrate the manner in which local builders varied stylistic details while following a traditional plan.

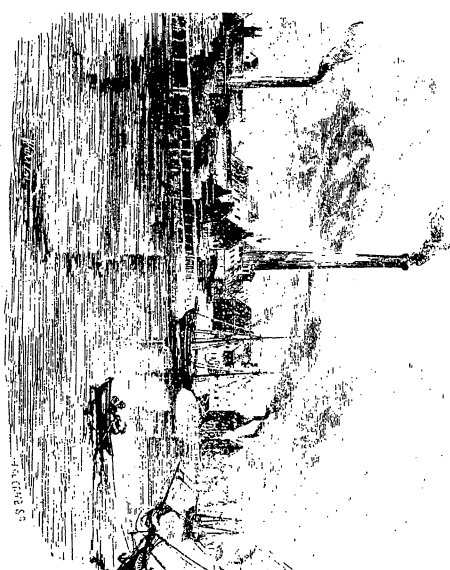
The factories on both sides of Otis Street were used by two furniture manufacturers who merged in 1914. Irving & Casson — A.H. Davenport were the finest furniture makers and wood finishers in New England. The Davenport firm lent its name to the davenport sofa, and furnished such buildings as the Iolani Palace in Honolulu in 1882 and the White House in 1903, as well as many of the buildings of F.H. Richardson and other famous architects of the time. The last major commission of the combined firm was for the furnishings of the United Nations buildings in New York City.

Walk back up Otis Street to the *Middlesex County Buildings*. In the 18th century, the waters of the Charles still reached this point. A granite tablet near the Second Street corner of the *Clerk of Courts Building* (1889; 4) commemorates the landing of the British troops here on April 19, 1775.

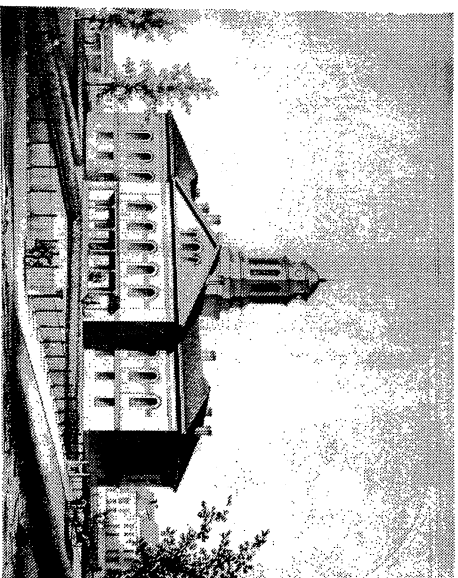
The most important of the County buildings is the *Old Superior Courthouse* (1813 and 1848; 5). The design of Ammi B. Young, now heavily altered itself, it replaced and may have incorporated in its center section portions of the original Courthouse that was built in 1814 to plans by the noted Boston architect, Charles Bulfinch. On the north side of the complex is the monumental *Registry of Deeds and Probate Court* (1898; 6), designed by Olin W. Cutter.

Cross Third Street to see 55-61 Otis Street (1851-1852; 7). This fine row of Greek Revival townhouses was built by William A. Hall, a local real estate entrepreneur, and the son of the builder of 36-46 Second Street. This part of Otis Street, known as "Millionaires' Row," was an early suburban development and reflects the urbane character of houses built 10 years earlier on Beacon Hill.

Walk south to 83-95 Third Street (1860; 8). These seven attached houses represent a later style than the preceding brick



New England Glass Works, 1855



Clerk of Courts Building, 1889

4 row. Similar to homes built in Boston's South End a few years before, they have concave Mansard roofs, high stoops and elaborately carved brownstone trim.

The next building south on Third Street is the *Holy Cross Polish National Church* (1827; 9). Built for a Unitarian congregation, this Federal style meeting house is the second oldest church building standing in the city. Its design, from Asher Benjamin's pattern book, recalls that architect's Charles Street Meeting House (1804) in Boston. Holy Cross was taken over by a growing Polish congregation in 1942.

The fine brick house behind the church at 59 *Thorncliffe Street* (1827; 10) was built at the same time as the church but has never been associated with it. An early Greek Revival style townhouse, it has a delicate cornice and doorway set in a shallow recess and raised a few steps like those of the Federal style row at 30-34 Second Street. The long windows and cast iron balcony, which indicate that the main living area is on the second floor, are typical Greek Revival elements that can also be seen on the later row at 55-61 Otis Street.

At 69 *Thorncliffe Street* (1845; 11) is the best preserved Greek Revival home in East Cambridge. In the prosperous years between 1840 and 1855, well-to-do merchants and lawyers built the Greek Revival homes that are now an East Cambridge landmark. The decorative trim that adds expressiveness to the neighborhood was built up from standard, mass-produced parts, but even though the Ionic columns cost only \$3 each, local builders were highly skilled in working out the complicated proportions necessary to adapt Greek temple architecture to the needs of a modest family home.

71-73 *Thorncliffe Street* (1840-1847; 12) is another typical home of the Greek Revival period, while 74 *Thorncliffe Street* (c. 1843; 13), of the same period, has been substantially altered.

To the northwest stands the *Putnam School* (1887; 14), built on the site of the Revolutionary Fort Putnam. The rich surface decoration, all in brick and terra cotta, is an identifying characteristic of one type of the Queen Anne style, a late Victorian style rare in East Cambridge.

The area south of *Thorncliffe Street* is the location of most of the district's later workers' cottages, the simplest type of single family housing in the first half of the 19th century. The area was built up as Irish and European immigrants moved here to work in local factories. Their cottages, built end-to-street with the entrance to the side of the lot, were a more spacious alternative to the row houses common in Boston.

At 84-94 *Thorncliffe Street* (1867; 15) is a brick row typical of the building that took place in East Cambridge after thousands of immigrants began to crowd into the district. The

5 Mansard roof adds nearly a full extra story while keeping the appearance of a two-story house.

At the end of the block is 116 *Thorncliffe Street* (1865; 16), a Greek Revival home in nearly perfect original condition. The fine iron fence at Fifth Street recalls the street's 19th century character.

131 *Thorncliffe Street* (1844; 17) is a good example of a simple Greek Revival cottage. The door frame shows how builders replaced more expensive columned porches with flat moldings that kept the Greek character. More workers' cottages of the mid-1800s stand at 136, 142, 142½, 144 and 146 *Thorncliffe Street*.

The view from the intersection of *Thorncliffe* and *Sixth Streets* suggests the area's original topography. Look west to see where the ground levels out; this was the edge of the salt marshes until the Civil War.

Walk north on Sixth Street to the *Sacred Heart Rectory* (1885) and *Church* (1874; 18), a successor to the old St. John's Church built in 1842 by a growing Irish Catholic population. Sacred Heart is the only East Cambridge church that is still occupied by the congregation that built it. In the 1930s the parish was so large that after 11:30 Mass groups of boys, known as the Senecas, the Shamrocks, the Pirates and the Sacred Hearts, could be seen by the hundreds enjoying their free Sunday at the corner of Spring and Sixth Streets.

At the corner of Otis and Sixth is 140-142 *Otis Street* (1895; 19), the last mansion to be constructed in East Cambridge and the only local example of the decorative Colonial Revival style single-family house so common in Boston's turn of the century suburbs. This style was partly inspired by renewed interest in Early America after the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876. It is now a funeral home.

Walk east on Otis Street to 134 *Otis Street* (1868; 20), Cambridge's best example of a home in the vernacular *Bracketed Style*, notable for the paired brackets at the cornice, the round-headed window in the gable, and the tall double doors with glass panels. The colors and the attractive cast iron fence are authentic for the period.

At the intersection of *Otis* and *Fifth Streets*, look up the hill to St. Hedwig's Polish Church at 99-101 *Otis Street* (21). It was built by a growing Polish population whose original church building had been completely demolished by the hurricane of 1938.

Walk north on Fifth Street to *Cambridge Street*, the first turnpike built in East Cambridge and long the area's main commercial street. Many residents can remember when Cambridge Street was paved with wooden blocks.

6 Continue north on Fifth Street to Gore Street. The area to the north and west is the site of J.P. Squire's huge meat-packing plant, the first to use ice to refrigerate meat (22). The commercial cutting of ice began in Cambridge, and blocks were cut from Fresh Pond and brought to East Cambridge by wagon or railroad. Across from the factory was Squire's Court, a massive apartment block that housed many of the factory workers (23).

Walk east on Gore Street to 69-79 *Gore Street* (24). Built for glass-workers in 1814, these homes are the earliest industrial housing in Cambridge. Gore Street also has many examples of the single-family workers' cottages seen earlier on *Thorncliffe Street*.

Walk south on Scitappa Street to the corner of Cambridge Street and St. Francis of Assisi Church (1837; 25). Built originally as a Baptist meeting house, it was remodeled in 1917 by the Franciscan Fathers for the area's Italian population, which grew rapidly during the first half of the 19th century. It was traditional for local Italian families to rent wagons at Callahan's Barn, then on *Thorncliffe* at Eighth Street, and drive to the Charlestown freight yards every autumn to buy grapes for homemade wine.

Continue east on Cambridge Street. At 292 Cambridge Street is the *East Cambridge Savings Bank* (1931; Thomas M. James, architect; 26), undertaken during the Depression to provide work for local artisans. Built in polished Maine granite, the clean forms of the Moderne Style are decorated with architectural sculpture by Paul Fiedle of New York. The fine Byzantine interiors include pink North African marble walls, carved doors and brightly colored terra cotta ceilings decorated by Alfred Rasmussen, a prominent Boston muralist.

Next door, at 262-266 *Cambridge Street* (1830; 27) are two Federal row houses in nearly original condition. Especially noteworthy are the elliptically arched doorways typical of the style and the basement level passageways giving direct access to the carriage house at the rear.

On the lawn of the Registry of Deeds on Cambridge Street at the corner of Third is the *East Cambridge History Station* (28). A Bicentennial project of the Cambridge Historical Commission, it depicts the history of the area in maps and early views.

To return to the Lechmere MBTA Station, walk east on Cambridge Street, past the many commercial buildings and fraternal organizations that have always characterized the area.